

When Melvin Van Peebles burst onto the American cinematic scene in 1971 with Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, Hollywood had to regroup: Here was a feature film by a Black man, about Black people, told from an unapologetically Black point of view, directed at a Black audience. And it made money. Lots of money. And by so doing it knocked open the door to let in the surge of Black films that,

briefly, flooded the market in the mid-to-late seventies. Around Hollywood, Melvin quickly became known as an enfant terrible who took no nonsense—even from the studio executives who could affect his professional fate. To this day he sports a tattoo, a small necklace of blue-ink instructions that say in French, "Cut on the dotted line." "It's to remind me that I could lose it at any time," he says, with a relaxed chuckle.

A successful playwright (*Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*), director (*Sweetback and Watermelon Man*) and television scriptwriter

(*Sophisticated Gents*), Melvin has also authored 13 books (the latest, *Panther*, was published in May by Thunder's Mouth Press). His investments from the profits have allowed him to live comfortably; he now splits his time between New York, Europe and L.A. In April Capitol Records released Melvin's ninth album, *Ghetto Gothic*.

Flash forward 20 years after Melvin's maiden film, when son Mario caught Hollywood's attention with his first feature, *New Jack City*. (As a teen, Mario made his first film

appearance in *Sweetback*.) New Jack, too, made serious bank. Later the two collaborated on *Posse*, a period western that Melvin appeared in and Mario directed. But *Posse*, they both say, was a stepping-stone to their current project, *Panther*. Set in the turbulent sixties, *Panther* chronicles the rise of the Black Panther Party, outlining how and why the Panthers were born. Using actors such as Kadeem Hardison, Courtney Vance, Bokeem Woodbine and the rapper Nefertiti, the film follows the party's growing acceptance in the Black community—first in Oakland and then nationally—and gives us a peek at why FBI director J. Edgar Hoover felt threatened enough to throw the weight of the U.S. government behind a program of espionage and infiltration designed to make the Panthers extinct.

Both men are passionate about their new movie, and respect and affection are obvious between father and son. Karen Grigsby Bates spoke with Melvin, elegant and ironic as ever, and Mario, boyish, charming and extremely focused, in Los Angeles, just before the film opened nationwide.

ESSENCE: Where did the idea for this story come from?

Melvin: Originally it was a novel. I showed Mario the final draft and asked if he had any comments. We were on a train, coming back from Philly or Washington, I forget. And when he finished it, he said, "Dad, I think this would make a great movie." I agreed with him, but considering the subject matter, I never thought we'd be able to bring the truth to the screen. But Mario said, "I'll stand with you." My experience, his clout and that of Preston Holmes, our other producer, helped get this film made.

ESSENCE: Once you decided to work together, did you find you had the same vision? After all, you're from two different generations. You lived through it, Melvin.

Melvin: We had the same vision. Mario had the visual concept and he was able to, with his questions, bring out clarifications

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by karen grigsby bates

MELVIN AND MARIO VAN

PEEBLES TALK ABOUT THEIR SPE-

CIAL FATHER-SON BOND AND

TELL HOW THEY BREATHED LIFE

INTO THEIR MOVIE, *PANTHER*

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I probably would have overlooked. Not having lived through this experience, Mario would ask, "Hey Daddy, what happened here?" So it forced me to make things clearer for the young people. Now it's understandable across the board, whereas if we'd done it solely from my perspective, I might have left out many things that were obvious to me. You forget, when time passes, what is and isn't obvious.

Mario: We had to decide what our primary objectives were for the film. Some of that, really, was dictated by the movie. What I found fascinating was that the Panthers appealed across the board to the brothers on the block. That was their power base, the community. That's where "power to the people" came from. So the film was designed to reach "the people."

Melvin: In *Sweetback*—and pardon me for going back to it—the star of that film was the Black community. And the star of this film is the Black community also; it's what the Panthers were all about. Community empowerment was an idea whose time had come, and that idea spread past the

borders of just Blacks: Now you've got Gray Panthers and ACT-UP. They are direct descendants of the Panthers.

ESSENCE: *What kinds of challenges did you face in getting the film approved and financed?*

Melvin: Originally it was Tribeca, Robert DeNiro's film company, that said "Go ahead." But instead of opting for the glamour or prestige of a big-bucks production, we chose to have the political freedom to do the film we wanted to do.

That's what's so glorious about Mario and Preston: They were still able to achieve four or five times the production value of a more expensive film. Everybody came in and pulled together. Some key people made sacrifices so they could be part of this project. Many people volunteered to take tremendous cuts in pay just so they could do this.

ESSENCE: *Why did you two decide to examine the past, when there's so much happening in America right now?*

Melvin: Well, first, *nothing* has changed! The gravity then is parallel with the gravity of our situation now.

Mario: One of the biggest things Dad brought to this film was the whole parallel between the *then* and *now* of

drugs and alcohol being brought into the Black community. These same communities that were insisting on power to the people have been flooded with alcohol and drugs; they've been medicated. And the gangs have inherited the bravado of what might have been Panther life—but without the ideology to understand what their actions are.

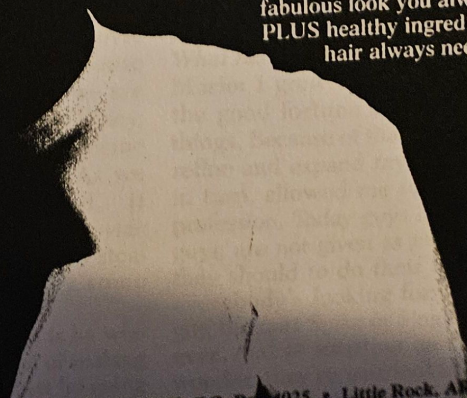
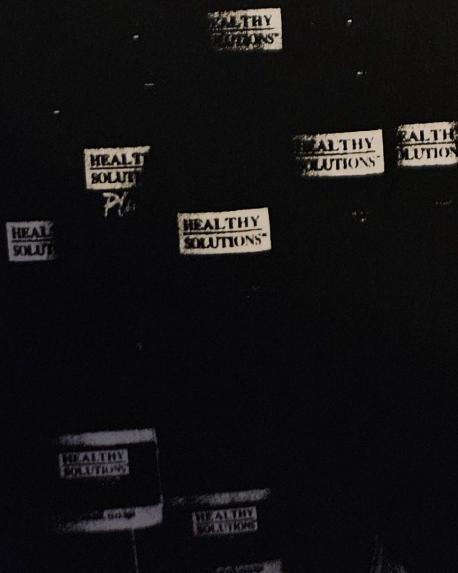
ESSENCE: *Are you worried about the effect the film might have on young brothers?*

Mario: No. We tested this movie with 20-to-30-year-olds, and they loved it. Then the studios said, "Okay, now test it with the kids." So we got young brothers, you know, the ones with braids, with their pants hanging down, who came in loud and crazy. But then something happened, something I've never seen happen in a movie. As the film started to roll, their mouths were open. The beer bottles went down. The beepers were turned off. It was absolutely silent—you could hear a pin drop!

See, it's one thing to say "Here's a problem"; it's another to show you a way out. And the Panthers, whatever else they did, showed us how to feed, how to house one another. I'll never forget being interviewed in Africa

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once, and the brother who was interviewing me said, "You know, Mario, when you hear about my country, you hear about us starving. And when we hear about [Black] America, we hear about you guys on crack, with guns, shooting. So we hear about one another's pain. But tell me: What stories will you tell when you've already told the stories of your pain?"

That stayed with me. And I thought, Well, we've seen victimization. We've seen slavery. We know we can do that. Let's go somewhere else.

ESSENCE: Speaking of going somewhere else, what do each of you think about the current crop of Black filmmakers? Are they breaking new ground or just telling the same old, painful stories?

Melvin: I'm happy about all of them. In our starvation, in our not having had the opportunity to do this, sometimes we put too much weight on someone's first film. Often it's very normal to have your coming-of-age novel. Now you have your coming-of-age movie. So I'm just deliriously happy that these people are having the opportunity to accrue knowledge and expertise.

Mario: I have no blind optimism regarding how long I'll have the clout

to be in the position to direct. It means my dad and I try to make each film like it could be the last—because one day, it will be the last. Not all of the young Black directors have that perspective, though. Sometimes, we think we got here on our own. A lot of us don't understand how important it is to be well-versed in our craft.

ESSENCE: But studios also bear some of the responsibility, right? They often rush to get Black product—any Black product—to an audience they perceive will snap it up just because it's Black.

Mario: Absolutely! The Black movie audience has amazing power, because we vote with our dollars. So as we are allowed to develop taste, we'll say, "Hey, wait a minute—you can't come at us with just any old stuff!" As we become more sophisticated, it becomes harder to give us the movies just about, say, the five guys who steal hubcaps, unless there's truly some fresh take on it.

Melvin: What it boils down to is he who has the gold—or the potential of making the gold—makes the rules. Just by going to see Black movies, Black people are providing us filmmakers with a certain amount of empowerment. Otherwise,

studios wouldn't be interested in having us continue to make movies.

ESSENCE: What would you each say you've learned from the other?

Melvin: Well, I've had the pleasure of seeing Mario operate. And hone many of the things that, when I was his age, I had to do more brashly, because of the lack of infrastructure for Black directors—not that we have a huge one at this stage of the game.

But I think Mario is where I'd like to be if I were his age right now. I find my son smart, and I find him courageous.

ESSENCE: How about you, Mario? What have you learned from your dad?

Mario: I grew up under him, so I had the good fortune of watching him do things. Because of that, I've been able to refine and expand my craft, which has, in turn, allowed me to advance in my profession. Today guys his age, talented guys, are not given as many chances as they should to do their thing, because everybody's looking for the next new guy, the next Spike or Singleton, or whoever. And in insisting on the next boy wonder, they're overlooking a tremendous reservoir of talent, skill and experience that the guys have who came

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before us. So, aside from the fact that I love working with my dad, by working together, I'm able to give back to him a little bit—a tiny fraction, really—of what he's given me. ♦

Journalist Karen Grigsby Bates, a contributing columnist to the op-ed pages of the Los Angeles Times, writes frequently about race, politics and culture.

THE ETTA JAMES STORY

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fact, they strung a sign around my neck that said, "I'm Etta James, and I'm a spoiled baby." I had to wear those words wherever I went.

It got worse. For a while I had to wear a diaper and baby bonnet and eat everything out of a baby bottle. Imagine me walking into the main cafeteria wearing this big white diaper with the words *poo poo* scrawled across my ass. And I wasn't the only one: Men who forgot to flush the toilet seat might be forced

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